



Foothills Landscape Project

An Overview

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Purpose & Need of Foothills Landscape Project

Maintain and improve watershed and ecological conditions by enhancing biologic integrity, increasing the ecosystem's resilience to disturbance, restoring connectivity, and supporting high water quality and soil productivity. All these factors work together to enhance the landscape's ability to provide ecosystem services essential to the surrounding communities and Forest visitors.



Project Vision

Create, restore and maintain ecosystems that are more resilient to natural disturbances. This includes activities that:

- Enhance wildlife habitat
- Reduce the risk of wildfires
- Improve water quality and soil health
- Provide sustainable recreation opportunities
- Connect people to these lands



Proposal Development

Citizens across Georgia have been collaborating with the U.S. Forest Service since 2016 to realize a shared vision to address complex conservation challenges across the Foothills Landscape. Stretching across 157,625 acres of the Chattahoochee National Forest, the Foothills Landscape marks the area where the mountains are visibly reduced.



Project action items

- Restore woodland communities, pine & oak-pine habitat, wetland and bog habitat, and canebrake
- Conserve hemlocks and improve streams with large woody debris and structures
- Improve forest resiliency with prescribed burning and reduce forest pests
- Help wildlife by connecting early successional habitat, wildlife openings, and canopy gaps
- Protect old growth forests
- Improve trailheads and trail systems
- Improve water and soil quality by reducing sediment delivery to streams by modifications to the road system and recreation sites



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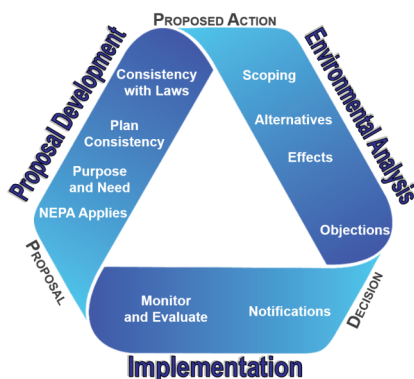
Foothills Landscape Project Collaboration in Action

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Collaborative Effort

The Foothills Landscape project was developed with collaborative input stretching from October 2016 to October 2017. The purpose of the engagement was to discuss and debate the restoration needs on the landscape and the potential tools to improve the ecosystem's resilience to disturbance and sustainability. There were two rounds of Community Conversations, four integrated workshops, five small group meetings and eight field trips convened during this time. In 2018, stakeholders met to collaboratively develop alternatives and design a multi-party monitoring plan.



Project timeline

October 2017	Public scoping
Dec 2017-Oct 2019	Response to public comments and environmental analysis
December 2019	Pre-decisional Environmental Assessment released and
January 2020	30-day Comment Period ends
Spring 2020	Draft Decision
Summer 2020	Final Decision

Planning Approach

Using the 'toolbox approach' in planning this project, ground surveys will determine restoration treatments. Many forest conditions are fleeting, therefore surveys will occur immediately before implementation. We will monitor the effects to



ensure that the outcomes are within the range of those predicted in the environmental analysis. The interdisciplinary team is using the best available science, professional judgment and input from the collaborative community to develop sideboards, additional instructions, or limitations on the treatments to minimize resource effects while meeting the project objectives.



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Foothills Landscape Project Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Foothills Landscape project and why is it important?

The Foothills Landscape project proposes to restore healthy forest habitat and watersheds across 157,625 acres of the Chattahoochee National Forest, where the mountains are visibly reduced to foothills. The objective is to create, restore and maintain forests and waters that are resilient, sustainable and productive for wildlife and people.

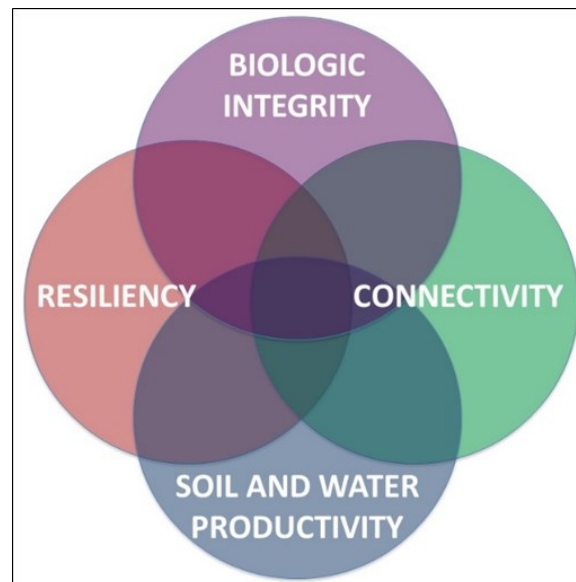
Where is the Foothills Landscape project?

The project area is located in northern Georgia and encompasses the landscape where the mountains are visibly reduced to foothills. It includes portions of the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area and Dawson, Fannin, Gilmer, Habersham, Lumpkin, Murray, Rabun and White counties. There are more than 1,100 miles of streams, nearly 200 miles of trails and dozens of recreation sites in the project area. According to 2017 population estimates, almost a quarter-million people reside in the counties included across the Foothills Landscape, with Atlanta, the ninth largest metropolitan area in the country, within hours of the project area. No activities are proposed on land outside of Forest Service jurisdiction.

Why are you doing the Foothills Landscape project?

Currently, the Foothills Landscape faces many threats, including unhealthy forest conditions, impairments to waterways and impacts from human use. The healthier forest conditions envisioned by this project will enhance wildlife habitat, improve watershed health, conserve and create unique habitats, provide sustainable recreation, and protect communities from wildfire. The project proposes a variety of management activities to accomplish these goals.

This project is needed because active restoration on a landscape scale is critical to moving existing conditions within the Foothills towards meeting desired, achievable future conditions. This includes actions to maintain and improve watershed and ecological conditions by enhancing biologic integrity, increasing the ecosystem's resilience to disturbance, restoring connectivity, and supporting high water quality and soil productivity.



All these factors are consistent with the characteristics of a healthy watershed and work together to enhance the landscape's ability to provide ecosystem services essential to the surrounding communities and forest visitors.

Existing and desired conditions under each of the need categories can be found in Table 3 of the Environmental Assessment that support the need for this project.





Frequently Asked Questions *continued*

Where will you determine what watersheds are treated and which forest tracts are suitable for restoration?

The environmental analysis includes a decision matrix that provides specific criteria analysis to determine where and which treatment is appropriate on any given landscape, based on the conditions of a forest tract at a given point in time. The matrix provides consistency and scientific certainty in application of treatments, while allowing forest managers flexibility as forest conditions change over the span of the project timeframe.

What is the timeframe for the Foothills Landscape project?

The actions outlined by this project will be implemented over time to meet restoration needs within the Foothills Landscape, under the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. The project uses a planning approach that allows land managers to take the most appropriate action after evaluating ground conditions as specific forest locations are assessed. Because the project will adapt to conditions on the ground over time as work is planned every year, public involvement in the Foothills project will continue during implementation.

What activities will the Foothills Landscape project include?

The healthier forest conditions envisioned by this project will enhance wildlife habitat, improve watershed health, conserve and create unique habitats, provide sustainable recreation, and protect communities from wildfire. The project proposes a variety of management activities to accomplish these goals.

How is the planning approach for this project different?

The Foothills Landscape Project is using a “flexible toolbox” planning approach which focuses on the condition of forested stands and sites known to occur at locations across the landscape. The selected treatment activities have specified limitations and are only implemented if deemed appropriate upon evaluation of conditions on the ground.

This approach helps land managers account for imperfect information and provides the flexibility to select and apply treatments that would best address the needs to help achieve desired outcomes. Planning projects in this way at the landscape-scale is believed to be a more efficient and effective way to accomplish restoration goals.

The condition of forest stands and sites will be assessed prior to implementation to confirm the restoration needs align with the objectives identified and analyzed in the Environmental Assessment. The locations and timing of treatments would continue to be selected and prioritized using a systematic process.

How does the Foothills Landscape project affect visitors, neighbors, and communities?

More than just trees and streams, the Foothills landscape is a popular local destination for the people and communities that live among this forest area – reflecting our histories and defining our future. Recognizing the passion and ownership of the people and stakeholders who value the Foothills landscape, this project reflects the values and desires of participants that helped create this shared vision. When the national forest land is restored, we enhance the value of our neighbors' lands and rural communities. Through shared stewardship, the Foothills landscape will sustain benefits for generations to come.





Frequently Asked Questions *continued*

How does the Foothills Landscape project compare to previous projects?

We designed the Foothills landscape project to be different from the very beginning, collaborating in partnership with stakeholders and surrounding communities to create a plan reflecting local values that also meets complex land management challenges. Citizens across Georgia collaborated with the U.S. Forest Service over two years to realize a shared vision to address complex conservation challenges across the Foothills Landscape. The Forest Service has listened to your concerns and feedback, and performed a sound and rigorous scientific environmental analysis to ensure the plan meets our shared vision.

For the first time in Georgia, the Foothills landscape project is designed to provide flexible tools to respond to changing landscape conditions over time. The project uses condition-based planning, that allows land managers to take the most appropriate action after evaluating ground conditions as specific forest locations are assessed. Because the project will adapt to conditions on the ground over time as work is planned every year, public involvement in the Foothills project will continue during implementation.

Why did the acreage area of the project increase from 143,000 acres?

Two areas were added to the project area to allow the Forest Service to conserve a unique mountain bog habitat in Rabun County, as well as the former Boggs Creek campground, which will be decommissioned permanently following tornado damage several years ago.

Will the project change if I comment on the Environmental Assessment?

No final decisions have been made. Decisions can change based on public comments and additional information people may offer.



Where can I find out more about the Foothills Landscape project?

To learn more about the Foothills Landscape, visit www.fs.usda.gov/goto/Foothills. A direct link to the project documents can be found on the project webpage at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=52509>. The project webpage includes instructions on how to submit comments online or by mail.

You may also sign up to receive information about the Foothills Landscape project by email. You can also keep in touch with happenings on our Facebook and Twitter pages (@ChattOconeeNF). If you have specific questions about the Foothills Landscape project, contact team leader Stephanie Israel at sm.fs.foothills@usda.gov or (770) 297-3095.

